



Secret conversation opportunities facilitate minority influence in virtual groups: The influence on majority power, information processing, and decision quality[☆]



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ABSTRACT

We examined the impact of secret conversation opportunities during virtual team discussions on majority opinion holders' motivation to attend to minority opinion holders. Studies 1a and b showed that majorities were more motivated to process others' arguments when secret conversation opportunities were available (vs. not), provided these arguments contained unique (vs. shared) information and this information was offered by the minority (vs. majority). Study 2 demonstrated that this effect occurs because secret opportunities made majorities feel less powerful after being exposed to unique information from the minority (Study 2a), especially when majority members expected others to use these channels (Study 2b). Study 3 used an interactive group decision-making task and demonstrated that the increased majority motivation triggered by secret opportunities increased group decision quality. Study 3 also examined whether secret opportunities influence the minority and whether the effect is robust across different communication settings.

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1. Introduction

Work groups are often split into a majority of people holding a particular viewpoint about priorities, interests, or agendas and a minority of people who have a different view. However, majority viewpoints are not always correct and work groups can benefit from minority opinion holders expressing their dissenting views. Indeed, groups with norms and processes in place that encourage both expression and consideration of dissenting minority viewpoints, regardless of their accuracy, tend to process information more thoroughly, are more creative, learn more during group deliberations, and make better decisions (De Dreu & West, 2001; Goncalo & Staw, 2006; Gruenfeld, 1995; Nemeth, Brown, & Rogers, 2001; Nemeth, Connell, Rogers, & Brown, 2001; Nemeth & Goncalo, 2011; Phillips, 2003; for reviews see Mannix & Neale, 2005; Wood, Lundgren, Ouellette, Busceme, & Blackstone, 1994).

Despite these potential benefits, minority opinion holders often fail to express their views (Asch, 1951) and even if they do, majorities tend to discount their views (Moscovici, 1980, 1985). One

promising solution to this problem is virtual communication environments, in which members engage in text-based interactions via a computer network (Mesmer-Magnus, DeChurch, Jimenez-Rodriguez, Wildman, & Shuffler, 2011). That is, the absence of vocal and visual cues during virtual group discussions can increase the influence of minority opinions because their minority status is less salient (Siegel, Dubrovsky, Kiesler, & McGuire, 1986; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986). The decrease in status cues, in turn, can dampen the negative impact of stereotyping (Bhappu, Griffith, & Northcraft, 1997; Giambattista & Bhappu, 2010), reduce conformity pressures (Pissarra & Jesuino, 2005) and promote the expression of minority opinions (Weisband, Schneider, & Connolly, 1995).

At the same time, other studies show that virtual communication environments do not guarantee that majority opinion holders will actually consider these minority viewpoints because they lack the motivation to attend to the minority opinion (e.g. Bazarova, Walther, & McLeod, 2012; Hollingshead, 1996; McLeod, Baron, Marti, & Yoon, 1997). This suggests that although communication environments sometimes entice minorities to express their views, they can also make it easier for majorities to ignore minority viewpoints. Collectively, these findings beg the question of how communication environments motivate majorities to integrate minority opinions. With more motivated majorities, minority opinions that are critical for success might have a better chance of

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being heard. The goal of the present research is to answer this question.

Our theoretical model starts with the assumption that for dissenting minority views to be influential, majority opinion holders must be motivated to scrutinize information from the minority opinion holder (e.g. De Dreu, Nijstad, & van Knippenberg, 2008). Majority opinion holders often reject dissenting minority viewpoints to restore their dominance when their power is threatened (Jetten & Hornsey, 2014). After all, the power of the majority is dependent on the ability to maintain its influence such that the entire group feels the normative and informational pressures to remain in line with the majority (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). Thus, if communication environments reduce the power of majority opinion holders, it could motivate them to examine dissenting views from the minority more carefully (Naquin, Kurtzberg, & Belkin, 2008, 2010).

We investigate one feature of communication environments as a mechanism for motivating information processing by the majority opinion holders: *the opportunity to engage in secret conversations with other team members*. Examining the influence of secret conversation opportunities on team dynamics is critical because communication technologies are increasingly enabling group members to have simultaneous conversations in their online and face-to-face discussions (Cameron & Webster, 2011; Reinsch, Turner, & Tinsley, 2008). We propose that secret conversation opportunities can reduce majority opinion holders' perceived control over the expression and integration of minority viewpoints. These reduced feelings of power, in turn, can motivate majorities to process minority opinions more deeply and positively affect group decision quality. Moreover, we propose that these differences in power are likely to emerge after information has been offered that is both unique (vs. shared) and emanates from the minority (vs. majority), as it challenges the status quo.

Our research is consequential for theory and practice. First, including communication channels in models of minority influence enriches our understanding of the factors that facilitate the processing of dissent. We identify a clear circumstance under which majorities are motivated to process dissenting minority viewpoints – when unique information accompanies the minority viewpoint and there are secret conversation opportunities available. Although using various communication opportunities can undermine the stability of relationships (Cameron & Webster, 2011; Stephens, 2012), these opportunities may also positively affect decision-making. Specifically, we argue that by reducing control over the group discussion, secret opportunities motivate majorities to open their minds to minority viewpoints that would otherwise be ignored. Second, our research responds to a recent call for a more thorough understanding of dissent in groups (Jetten & Hornsey, 2014, p. 479). The combination of controlled group simulations and interactive group discussions allows us to make both theoretically sound and ecologically valid conclusions. Third, because teams have become more diverse and dispersed (Ng & Van Dyne, 2001), our findings enable organizations to manage their workforce more effectively and to reap the benefits of divergent perspectives.

1.1. The influence of minority and majority opinion holders

It seems self-evident that minority opinion holders are generally less influential than majorities because majorities are larger and more powerful (Latané & Wolf, 1981). Moscovici conducted a program of research, in which he highlighted the ways in which majorities and minorities influence each other (Moscovici, 1980, 1985). First, majorities can influence minorities by inducing *public compliance* because minorities desire to gain approval from the majority. Second, minorities can influence majorities through a

process called *private conversion*. Private conversion elicits a change in majority member's private opinions without any publicly stated agreement with the minority viewpoint (Moscovici, 1980, 1985). Although public compliance and private conversion have been the focus of much past research on minority and majority influence, we believe that a third type of influence is important to understand – the public conversion of majority opinion holders. By public conversion we mean that majorities will scrutinize minority arguments and their own, and eventually change their publicly stated opinion in favor of the minority opinion.

Although the mere expression of dissent can suffice to increase majority attention to minority opinions, it rarely leads to public conversion (Wood et al., 1994). In fact, the communication literature found mixed support for minority influence, showing that online, virtual communication environments can facilitate the expression of the minority opinion holders' viewpoints (Weisband et al., 1995) but also decrease majority opinion holders' willingness to listen to these viewpoints (McLeod et al., 1997). This happens because majority members are often reluctant to change their minds in front of others and prefer to remain consistent with their publicly stated views (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Staw, 1997). These findings raise the question – when are minority opinion holders influential in virtual communication settings? Research by De Dreu and colleagues suggests that minority influence depends on the majority's motivation to hear alternative viewpoints and only occurs when situational factors motivate majority members to deeply process and scrutinize minority opinions (De Dreu, 2007; De Dreu & De Vries, 1996; De Vries, De Dreu, Gordijn, & Schuurman, 1996). Thus, the key to facilitating minority influence lies in motivating the majority opinion holders to process minority viewpoints more deeply and publicly reconsider their stance in the face of dissent.

1.2. Secret conversation opportunities, majority power and motivated information processing

We propose that the presence of secret conversation opportunities can motivate majorities to integrate unique minority viewpoints because it lowers their sense of power to control the communication process. By secret conversation opportunities we mean a communication setting in which individual team members can secretly communicate with each other while also being immersed in a conversation with all other members. The availability of new technologies in today's workplace facilitates such secret conversations. For example, secret conversations can take place using different communication channels when team members decide to covertly send text messages to others in a face-to-face meeting without the rest of the group being aware, or when managers instruct their employees to discuss their work with each other without telling them whom they should include in their conversations. Secret conversations can also take place within the same communication channel; for example, when team members decide to send each other secret emails while having an email discussion with the entire team.

We propose that the presence of secret conversation opportunities can have important consequences for the influence of minority opinion holders because it lowers the feelings of power of the majority over the group discussion after they have been exposed to unique minority information. When engaging in a discussion with a dissenting minority member, majority members experience greater difficulty to act in a unified way and to achieve their goals (Jetten & Hornsey, 2014). To manage this difficulty, majorities tend to exercise control over the communication process, for example by refusing to fully consider the minority viewpoints in public discussions (Jetten & Hornsey, 2014; Prislin, Limbert, & Bauer, 2000; Turner, 1991). Thus, public forums that provide insight into who

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